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It's not end of road for old buses

By James Gonser
Advertiser Staff Writer

Three aging stainless-steel tour buses bound for the scrap heap will instead be transformed into mobile homeless shelters that will provide temporary housing at a Hau'ula church.

The unique shelters are part of an effort headed by the charity group H-5 Project.

The buses, donated by Roberts Hawaii Tours, are parked in a storage yard in Wahiawa, but will soon be refitted with beds and moved to Ohana Family of the Living God church on Hau'ula Homestead Road to create a safe place for homeless people in the area to sleep.

Church founder Brother George Chee said the church already has a program that allows homeless veterans to sleep on the property and the buses will be an extension of that program.

"The buses will be for anyone," Chee said. "If they get a good night's sleep, they will be better people the next day. Then they can go look for work and not worry so much."

The project is the brainchild of Tonga native Utu Langi, the founder and director of the H-5 Project, a faith-based group that cooks and delivers meals to about 3,000 homeless people every week from Wai'anae to Waimanalo.

"This is going to be the first three of many buses to come," Langi said. "It's an awesome thing. I'm so excited about it. Things are going to get better for the homeless folks out there."

City officials said they had no details on the proposal, but that it would need city approval to move forward. The converted buses would be considered structures and the church would have to obtain a conditional use permit. Also, the zoning of the church property would have to allow that type of structure, officials said. The city is now awaiting the plans.

Langi said he is hoping to work with city and state officials to get the necessary permits quickly because of the seriousness of the homeless situation. There are an estimated 6,000 homeless people living on the streets, in parks and on beaches on any given night.

In December, Stephanie Aveiro, executive director of the state Housing and Community Development Corp. of Hawai'i, said the state would support "out-of-the-box" ideas such as sheltering homeless people in old buses, boats and empty buildings as part of Gov. Linda Lingle's proposals to expand services to the homeless.

Langi, who completed a 10-day, 130-mile walk around O'ahu in November to raise public awareness of the growing number of homeless people, said government support for this type of project is critical to making it happen.



Langi says these three buses will be the first of many that will be transformed into shelters. An official with Roberts Hawaii says the tour company retires up to 20 buses a year.

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HOW TO HELP

The H-5 Project is seeking volunteers to help renovate the three buses to accommodate homeless people. The group also could use cash donations and material for the project.

For information, call Utu Langi at 223-5176.



Utu Langi checks out the storage area of one of the tour buses that Roberts Hawaii donated for the H-5 Project. Langi is the founder and executive director of the H-5 Project, also known as Hawaii Helping the Hungry Have Home.

Submitted by Council Chair Dela Cruz

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"It's a good thing that more people are buying into the idea," Langi said. "Two years ago I went around with the idea and nobody wanted to listen. Then it was mentioned by the Lingle administration and everybody seems to be talking about buses now."

David Goya, vice president of Roberts Hawaii, said the buses are 8 feet wide by 40 feet long. They are more than 20 years old and can easily be refitted to the new purpose.

"When you read about and see the homeless and they are out in the open, I think that this is a tremendous application," Goya said. "At least they are being sheltered from the elements."

Roberts has a fleet of about 600 school and tour buses and the company retires up to 20 buses a year, Goya said. If the project is successful, more buses will be donated for the project.

"It's very doable and good use of the buses," he said.

One of the buses will be developed into a prototype to show government officials and residents what the buses will look like when completed and how they will function, Langi said.

The two other buses will be parked at the church, near a city park where many homeless people live.

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Charity founder Utulua Langi says he believes the buses will measure up as sleeping shelters. "Things are going to get better for the homeless folks" in Hau'ula, he says.

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